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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 ASMARA 000340

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SUBJECT: Eritrea Fraud Summary through August 2009

Ref: (A) State 57623, (B) Asmara 279

(a) Country Conditions

¶1. The Eritrean government (GSE) continued its harsh economic policies, which further increased the scarcity of basic goods and the impoverishment its people. Grocery stores are thinly stocked; meat and fish are not always available, and basic commodities such as sugar, flour, cooking oil, coffee and tea are strictly rationed and are sometimes unavailable due to restrictions on imports and the government's monopoly on possessing hard currency (the official exchange rate is 15 nakfa to the dollar, but black market rates are 45 nakfa/dollar). Salaries for those in the public sector were frozen in 1999 though inflation has risen over 350% since then. Current inflation is estimated to be 35% and growing. President Isaias Afwerki stated in a July 2009 interview that people should "sacrifice a breakfast... to put in place a road." People are hungry and are resorting to increasingly desperate measures, including crime, to feed their families.

¶2. Hundreds of thousands of Eritrea's citizens are conscripted to national service where many are forced to serve until age 54 (men) and age 47 (women) at wages under \$30/month. Mandatory national service begins as early as age 17 for both boys and girls, when they are required to leave home to attend their 4th year of high school at "Sawa," a camp that includes intensive military training. Some conscripts have performed back-breaking hard labor since 1994 when national service began. The ministry of defense periodically conducts round-ups of any persons who cannot show evidence of their demobilization from national service. Round-ups may occur any time of day or night throughout the year, but become more frequent immediately before Eritrea's May 24th Independence Day holiday.

¶3. The GSE generally does not provide passports or exit visas to Eritreans who are not released from national service. Many parents seek any avenue to take their children out of the country prior to being conscripted, even at the risk of their own arrest. Those unable to obtain permission to leave Eritrea often flee illegally across the border to Sudan or Ethiopia where they hope to register as refugees. This has led to a massive exodus across Eritrea's borders, with as many as 3,000 people per month leaving the country and paying smugglers \$2,000-3,000 for a way out. According to the UN, Eritrea had the second-highest number of asylum seekers in the world in 2008, after Somalia.

¶4. The consular section in Asmara has been closed to most visa services since January 2007. The following explanation is posted on the Asmara Embassy website: "The Government of Eritrea has not consistently granted visas to State Department temporary visitors who provide vital support for our Embassy operations. Additionally, in direct violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, a treaty to which the Government of Eritrea is a signatory, consular staff are not notified if an American is arrested, nor can they travel freely to visit an American citizen in trouble. The Government of Eritrea does not allow unrestricted travel by American diplomatic and consular personnel, who are not

allowed outside the capital of Asmara without requesting permission to travel 10 days in advance. Permission is often not granted even when requested in advance. For these reasons we are closed for public operations except for the provision of necessary services to American citizens."

¶15. Asmara re-opened for student visa services in June 2009. Post also adjudicates nonimmigrant visas for USG exchange visitors, Eritrean government officials, and resident diplomats and members of international organizations and their families. Immigrant visas are limited to SIVs and adoptions. The consular section provides document intake services for immigrant and diversity visas, electronically and physically transfers cases to other posts upon request, and provides document verification services for U.S. embassies and consulates processing Eritrean applicants. Post anticipates remaining closed in the immediate future for most visa services, but continues to provide the full array of American Citizen Services.

¶16. Though Eritrea has historically been considered a low-to-medium fraud country, but its incidence is increasing due to deteriorating country conditions. Asmara is now a medium-fraud post, but as fraudulent activity increases, Asmara has the potential to become a high-fraud post as profit-motivated fraud rings learn to take advantage of a population desperate to escape the GSE's oppressive policies.

(b) NIV Fraud

¶17. No significant fraud was found in the limited number of NIVs adjudicated by post. For student visa applicants, the University of Asmara generally provides reliable student record verification and

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issues temporary diplomas until students have completed national service. Post is aware of some cases when the university would not release records because students had not yet completed national service. University graduates sometime work as graduate assistants for their national service and are more likely than others to be released after less than two years. Posts interviewing Eritrean students should be aware that the University of Asmara graduated its final class in 2007, and it now acts as an umbrella organization for the testing and recordkeeping of seven institutions of higher education (IHE): Eritrea Institute of Technology (first graduating class: 2007), Hamelmallo Agricultural College (first class: 2008), College of Health Sciences (first class: 2008), Orotta School of Medicine (first class will graduate November 2009), College of Marine Sciences & Technology (first class: 2008), College of Business and Economics (first class: 2008), and the College of Arts and Social Sciences (first class: 2008). None of the institutions is currently accredited, but in 2007 the GSE created the National Board for Higher Education (NBHE), which is currently producing guidelines to assess each institution and determine if they will be accredited.

¶18. Post completed several validation studies during the reporting period. Of those receiving B1/B2 visas between May 01, 2006 and December 31, 2008 (until January 15, 2007, the consular section was still fully open to the public for visa services), about 66% of those receiving visas returned to Eritrea. Not uncommon for Eritrea, post could not reach about 14% of the visa recipients by phone, so actual percentage may be 5% higher or lower[t1]. About 30% of the visa recipients are still in the U.S. both legally (after adjusting status) and illegally. The rest died or did not travel on their visas. Most of those that did not return were young men (under age 40). Post believes the relatively high return rate is because the GSE only issues passports and exit visas to those it believes will return to Eritrea. Post also found that 100% of those receiving J-1 exchange visas to participate in the international visitor program over the last five years have returned. Four of the last twelve FSN's post sent to training in the U.S. did not return; post has implemented a policy of sending its local employees to regional training rather than to the U.S.

(c) IV Fraud

¶9. Post is not currently issuing IVs other than adoptions and SIVs, and did not experience fraud during the reporting period. Asmara is considered to be a medium-fraud post for IVs. Marriage fraud has always been a concern of the consular section due to the number of arranged marriages (greater than 80% in Eritrea). Almost all weddings in Eritrea are grand affairs, and even impoverished families celebrate with elaborate ceremonies recorded on video. Any wedding without an elaborate religious service and video documentation is highly suspect. Note that other Western embassies in Asmara adjudicating family-based immigration visas report that as many as 40% of marriage certificates are fraudulent.

(d) DV Fraud

¶10. Asmara is considered to be a medium-fraud post for DVs. Though not open for DV processing, post performs a significant amount of document verification in support of DVs adjudicated at other posts. Twenty-three of 209 documents (11%) verified by post during this reporting period were fraudulent, most of them school transcripts, and most of them toward the end of the DV processing year. Posts adjudicating Eritrean DV applicants should be aware that government secondary schools for the 1994 through 2003 school years admitted (and school transcripts reflect marks for) students from the 8th to 11th grade; a student completing 11th grade in 2006 or earlier was considered to have finished high school. Beginning with the 2003-04 school year, government secondary schools admitted (and school transcripts reflect marks for) students from the 9th to 12th grade; a student is thus now not considered by the GSE to have completed high school until completing 12th grade, away from home at Sawa. Secondary school transcripts for students completing 12th grade in 2007 or later will reflect the grades from their final year at Sawa.

There should be no transcripts showing a student completing the fourth year of a government secondary school in 2007. Note that Asmara's two private schools, the Italian School and the Asmara International Community School, teach through the 12th grade, and their Eritrean students are still required by Eritrean law to go to Sawa for the three-month segment of military training before beginning the required minimum 18 months of national service.

¶11. Post is aware of the high propensity for DV fraud by Eritrean applicants. Post has received several examples of unsolicited e-mails circulating around Asmara from the "Diversity Visa Coordinator, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S Department of State" advising the recipient that he is a "visa lottery program winner." A secondary school director who is a good contact of the consular

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section states that he is often asked to falsify documents for DV applicants; he mentioned a person known by name of Eritrean or Ethiopian origin, who travels between Khartoum and Nairobi, charging up to \$2,000 per school transcript. Post has also encountered many fraudulent documents bearing the stamp of a known person who left the Asmara public registration office in 2005. Post has seen several examples of legitimate students providing falsified documents, e.g. substituting their name on another student's transcripts when they could have provided their own, or enhancing the grades on their own transcripts, such as to show a "B" average rather than a "D" average. Asmara advises any posts adjudicating DVs to scan and send any questionable documents to us for verification; post can usually provide results within a few days.

(e) ACS and U.S. Passport Fraud

¶12. Asmara is a low-fraud post for ACS and U.S. passports. The majority of CRBA applicants are for infants or toddlers with non-resident Eritrean-American fathers and Eritrean mothers, often one or two decades younger than and not necessarily married to the child's father. The Eritrean-American father often has a difficult time demonstrating adequate physical presence in the US to transmit citizenship. Often, there is no passport stamp showing entry into the U.S. though the father states he was living there. Because of this, post often requests additional proof of physical presence such as school transcripts, W2 statements, and tax records. Post has

received several fraudulent employment letters so does not accept these as proof of physical presence. Several cases remain outstanding as it approaches 90 days since the AmCit parent was notified that additional proof is needed to establish physical presence; these cases may yet prove to be fraudulent. Post has not had any false paternity claims. DNA testing had been used in the recent past to prove out-of-wedlock paternity, but no fraud was ever found, and all parties completed the tests as requested (no "no shows[t2]").

(f) Adoption Fraud

¶13. Asmara accepts petitions for the adoption of Eritrean children, and is a low-fraud post for adoptions. Eritrea allows prospective parents to fully adopt an Eritrean child, but at least one parent must be of Eritrean descent. There are two ways to adopt a child. If a child is abandoned as an infant and placed in an orphanage, the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare administers the adoption. ConOff consulted with the ministry and determined that sound procedures are in place to assure children are truly orphans and adoptions are valid. The other method is through the adoption court: if the parent(s) have died or are unable to care for a child, adoption may be granted, usually to a family member. Post had several cases during this reporting period where the prospective adoptive parents had been granted guardianship, but not adoption, of the child they wanted to adopt. All were instructed to finalize the adoptions through the adoption court and were able to do so within several months. Post requested proof of numerous documents (birth certificates, death certificates, court adoption papers) for several adoption cases and none were fraudulent.

(g) DNA Testing

¶14. Asmara uses DNA testing for children and siblings of AmCits and LPR's (IR2, F2, F4 and Visas 92 follow-to-join cases), primarily at the request of USCIS in the U.S. Requests are increasing - post performed 29 DNA tests over the past 18 month period but most were in the last six months. Asmara does not generally receive the results of the tests requested by USCIS, but of the four results received during the reporting period, one was fraudulent; two "brothers" were tested and one proved to be the legitimate child of the AmCit, the other did not. ConOff has witnessed DNA collection and post believes the laboratories used in Eritrea are reliable, strictly following required procedures. Due to deteriorating conditions in Eritrea, post believes the propensity for fraud in these types of cases is high and encourages posts processing Eritrean IVs to consider utilizing DNA testing.

(h) Asylum and Other DHS Benefits Fraud

¶15. Post only rarely issues Visas 92s and Visas 93s (asylum and refugee follow-to-join travel letters issued on visa foils) and has not experienced fraud during the reporting period. The risk of persecution is very real for many Eritrean citizens, particularly those unable to obtain a passport or exit visa who leave the country illegally. The military has shoot-to-kill orders for those caught trying to cross the border illegally. If caught or discovered to have left the country illegally, the person and his/her family members might be imprisoned and/or fined.

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¶16. Those persons who have completed national service, passed the age at which they might be recalled to national service, who are not members of non-registered religious groups, or, who are politically well-connected are the most likely to be able to obtain passports and exit visas and leave the country legally[t3]. Family members of some high-level GSE officials are known to have applied for asylum in the U.S. with the GSE official listed as a family member for a follow-to-join reunion. Post cooperates with DHS by sharing country-specific and derogatory information regarding the asylee's family relationships in Eritrea when available.

(i) Alien Smuggling

¶17. Eritrea is a source country for illegal travelers, and there are indications of organized systems designed to facilitate travel to the U.S. During just the past three months, post was alerted to a number of Eritreans found with fraudulent passports in Brazil, El Salvador, and Colombia[t4] (some via Rio/Sao Paolo and others via Tel Aviv). This is the first time post has learned of Eritreans attempting to travel toward the U.S. through Israel. During this reporting period, 12 full planeloads of Eritreans were deported from Egypt (most originating from the Sinai Peninsula) back to Eritrea, with several post contacts affirming that it is Israel, not Egypt, that is the targeted destination. The path to Israel through the Sinai Peninsula is a common route for Eritreans, and contacts in Israel inform post of an increasing number of Eritreans with fraudulent Australian and Israeli visas attempting to secure a visa through the Costa Rican, Mexican and Colombian Embassy with the end goal of arriving in the U.S. Post will be monitoring this potential route closely over the next reporting period.

¶18. Most alien smuggling is geared toward getting people out of Eritrea through Sudan or Ethiopia; subsequent attempts to travel to the U.S. originate in third countries. The smugglers[t5], who charge from \$1000 to as high as \$7000 are purported Eritrean military, police, and national security officers. There are also reports of Rashaida (a trans-national ethnic group known to be traders) involvement. In August 2009, Italian authorities discovered a boat in the Mediterranean originating from Libya where 75 of 80 Eritreans onboard a boat had perished. This is just one example of the desperate measures Eritreans are willing to take to escape the harsh conditions of their country.

(j) DS Criminal Fraud Investigations

¶19. Conoff and RSO have an excellent relationship and freely share information of value to both parties. The FSNI on the RSO's staff is readily available and assists the consular section with its fraud investigations as needed. Post has instigated no criminal fraud investigations during the reporting period, and strained relations between the USG and the GSE would make any sort of joint collaboration on a criminal investigation highly unlikely.

(k) Host Country Passports and Documents

¶20. Airline contacts have informed post of numerous cases of fraudulent Eritrean passports being used for travel to Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Milan. It is also often possible for those unable to obtain a passport to purchase one through corrupt officials at prices between \$6500 and \$10,000 (the normal price in Asmara is \$30); see reftel (b) for further details. Persons who flee the country to Sudan because they are not able to obtain a passport in Asmara may legally obtain a passport at the Eritrean Embassy in Khartoum. The GSE issues passports to Eritrean nationals living in Sudan, even if they departed illegally. A passport recently issued by the Eritrean Embassy in Khartoum may be a sign that the applicant has left Eritrea in violation of Eritrean immigration law, and therefore may have questionable ties to Eritrea. Eritrean passports issued in Khartoum cost \$50, and the applicant usually signs a document admitting to having left Eritrea illegally. Reports indicate the Eritrean Embassy in Khartoum maintains a list of persons the GSE deems hostile to the regime, and that Sudanese authorities have arrested and deported these individuals at the request of the Embassy. Post speculates the government facilitates passport issuance abroad in hopes that these emigrants will remit hard currency after settlement in wealthier countries.

¶21. The Eritrean passport has no identifiable security features. Bio data is hand-written, physical photographs are used, and the lamination is of extremely poor quality. Eritrea has signed an international agreement stating that they will begin issuing machine readable passports by March 31, 2010. The GSE has not yet signed a contract or paid a design/production fee to the company they have approached which would likely produce the passports, so post believes it is highly unlikely this will happen by the target date.

¶22. The Eritrean national ID card is the only document proving Eritrean nationality, but it is hand-written in Tigrinya and Arabic (no English), poorly laminated, and easily altered. It is possible that certain Eritrean citizens, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, may not be able to obtain an Eritrean ID card.

¶23. Post has received evidence that the GSE provides a certificate to Eritrean asylees living overseas to allow them entry/exit without an Eritrean entrance stamp being placed in their passport. The certificate is written only in Tigrinya, is stamped for entrance and exit, and provides proof of the individual's payment of the 2% "rehabilitation tax." The GSE allows asylees back into the country so that they will bring in desperately needed hard currency.

¶24. Adjudicating officers using completion of Eritrean national service as a sign of ties to Eritrea should be aware of reliable reports that a source in Dubai supplies false national service completion certificates. Post has not yet seen a fraudulent certificate, but official certificates have no known security features and could be easily forged. There are also reports that these certificates may be obtained fraudulently within Eritrea by corrupt officials. The GSE does not verify these certificates.

¶25. Post has received reports that officially issued birth and marriage certificates can be fraudulently obtained for \$330 from the Asmara (and probably other) Eritrean municipalities. Information contained on official birth and marriage certificates can be altered as desired. On a positive note, birth, marriage, and divorce records are now computerized and assigned a unique identification number. This system will eventually roll out to all towns and villages in Eritrea, and indicates the GSE's willingness to curb the falsification of legal documents.

(1) Cooperation with Host Government Authorities

¶26. Post continues to receive little cooperation on consular issues from the host government other than routine document verification. Because legitimately issued governmental documents may have been fraudulently obtained, this cooperation is of limited use. School records are well kept and schools cooperate in verifying these documents. Post believes that the GSE would likely cooperate with the USG regarding the breakup of any sort of organized fraud ring. Over this reporting period, see reftel (b), the GSE has arrested numerous individuals for issuing fraudulent documents and passports.

¶27. For most requests of the GSE, post must request assistance through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) via a diplomatic note. After following this process through the MFA, post finally received exemplars of entry and exit stamps for several ports of entry, and exemplars of the signatures used for authenticating documents. Post's Regional Consular Officer (RCO) recently received a visa after several diplomatic notes were sent (and numerous follow-up phone calls made) to the MFA. This is the first time in several years that an RCO has received a visa after numerous tries by two RCO's. ConOff arrived at post several weeks later than scheduled in April 2009, because of GSE delays in issuing the visa. When a diplomatic note was sent by post to the MFA implying the consular section might need to be closed in the absence of a consular officer, the visa was issued.

(m) Areas of Particular Concern

¶28. Post enjoys an excellent relationship with other embassies in Asmara, and consular-related information is readily shared. A consular working group recently started and holds meetings monthly to discuss consular issues, most recently focusing on fraud. Airline contacts also provide reliable and helpful information. Since Asmara is closed to the public for most visa services, it interfaces with many other posts (especially Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Kampala, Khartoum, and Johannesburg) on a regular basis, particularly for transferring cases and verifying documents. ConOff

also regularly receives information related to fraud from the post RSO and external DHS contacts.

¶29. The GSE's restrictive policies continue to hamper consular operations. GSE restrictions on diplomatic travel make it almost impossible for an American citizen to rely on emergency consular assistance outside of the capital. This was the case for two AmCits arrested during this reporting period, including an Eritrean-American Embassy employee who was recently arrested and held for four days. The Embassy was not notified, nor was the ConOff able to visit after learning of the arrest. Without significant changes in GSE policies, the consular section will likely remain closed for general visa services.

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¶30. With the opening of the consular section for student visas in June 2009, ConOff gave a presentation to 150 potential student visa applicants at the American Center, a few blocks away from the U.S. Embassy, as one of its regularly scheduled evening events. A month later at a similar event, members of the Eritrean national security office began signing in and videotaping participants as they entered. A few weeks later in August, the GSE informed the Embassy that it must cancel all public events, indefinitely. Because of this restriction, it is unlikely[t6] that any consular-related public outreach events will be held in the near future.

(n) Staffing and Training

¶31. Asmara is staffed by one consular officer who arrived in April 2009. This is the first time in 10 years that Asmara has had an experienced (third-tour) consular officer. ConOff backs up the Pol/Econ officer as needed. The section is also staffed by a consular assistant with 10 years experience, and a visa assistant with two and a half years experience. The Pol/Econ officer holds a consular commission and backs up as ConOff as needed. A 20-hour/week consular associate position and a full-time consular cashier position are unfilled, and will likely remain unfilled until the section re-opens fully for visa services.

¶32. ConOff has not completed any fraud training since ConGen in April[t7] 2006. The consular assistant completed the Fraud Prevention Workshop at FSI in spring 2004; and completed online courses in Detecting Fraudulent Documents in January 2009, and Examining U.S. Passports in April, 2009. The visa assistant completed online courses in Detecting Fraudulent Documents, February 2009; and Detecting Imposters, March 2009.

¶33. Post Fraud Prevention Manager and point of contact for all related issues is consular officer Pamela Hack, e-mail HackPJ@state.gov, telephone 291-1-120004 x2415 or IVG 596-2415.
[t1]Is this a guess or actual statistical analysis?
[t2]I took a sentence out here because it didn't track logically.
[t3]Your sentence did not make sense. Does this replacement meet the need?
[t4]Please note the correct spelling of the country.
[t5] The term coyote is not universally clear and isn't really necessary. The term trafficker applies to those who move people coercively. Smuggler is the best term for those hired by migrants to move them.
[t6]Be careful with the word "extremely." It really should only be applied to extreme circumstances.
[t7] Personal preference: comma not needed and is distracting between a month and year.